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The Feldenkrais Method®: How can it benefit dancers?
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“... make the impossible possible, the possible easy, and the easy elegant.”
– Moshe Feldenkrais

Soma is the Greek word for body, and the term somatic refers to the body as an experience rather than an object. Several somatic practices with common values about health and well being were emerging in North America by the 1970s. Somatic practices view the person as one process with no separation between mind and body, and recognize the environment as an active element of both development and healing. They seek to create positive change in the person, and many are influenced by Eastern philosophy. The Alexander Technique focusses on the crucial relationship of the head and spine; Ideokinesis harnesses the power of mental imagery to improve movement; Bartenieff FundamentalsSM focusses on a wholistic integration of efficient movement supported by human developmental patterns; Rolfing works with soft tissue manipulation and movement education to organize the whole body in gravity; Body Mind CenteringTM develops a sensory awareness of body tissues and their relationship to expression through movement. The Feldenkrais Method uses movement, attention and differentiation as the means for improving our natural abilities to learn, to change and to grow.

Dance training and the Feldenkrais Method of somatic education may seem at first glance to be fundamentally at odds with each other. Dance training for performance requires elite movement skills to be refined over many years through repetitive, physically demanding practice. The ultimate goal is to create an experience for the audience. The Feldenkrais Method is a system of somatic movement education that allows people to reconnect with their natural abilities to move, think and feel. Here, the individual's internal process is key during simple movement exploration. As a ballet teacher and Feldenkrais practitioner, I find that my students at York University have benefited in unexpected ways from a combination of vigorous dance training and this rich system of embodied learning.

Moshe Feldenkrais, PhD (1904–1984) developed his work in response to a debilitating knee injury. A physicist, mechanical engineer and Judo master, Feldenkrais' interdisciplinary approach drew upon psychology, neurophysiology and the martial arts. He focussed on improving the physical, mental and emotional functioning of the individual by working with the building blocks of human movement found in early childhood development. He considered the relationship of internal conflicts such as fear and anxiety to movement function. Primarily, Feldenkrais was interested in creating change through learning, not teaching. He was critical of traditional methods of education, and saw that optimal learning took place through practical experience that was pleasurable, novel and based on personal discovery. Feldenkrais saw that humans, unlike other animals, learn almost all motor skills from birth, and therefore can relearn a skill if it has been affected by illness or injury. He recognized that the brain, not muscles,

controls movement, and that the brain organizes movement in patterns, not in terms of single actions. Using a synthesis of current research, he targeted the innate capacity of the nervous system to develop practical ways to improve functions from early childhood motor learning such as reaching, turning and rolling. In this way, Feldenkrais sought to elicit the qualities of movement most of us experience as children before problems arise.

The Feldenkrais Method asks for certain conditions for learning, and this is where it parts company with other somatic practices. In daily life, we need to get things done more or less automatically to survive. However, to learn a new task effectively, or to change an old one, we need to slow down to the point where we can notice small differences in ourselves. Otherwise we rely on established habits. In addition, in the Feldenkrais Method minimal effort is used to enhance our ability to notice details. Humans learn best by experimentation, because it's engaging. We try something, notice how it feels, find out which way works best, try it again and so on. Babies learn this way, and it's what we do in a Feldenkrais lesson. We don't practice movement mechanically to improve; we experiment in lots of different ways so we can make choices based on our evaluation of the experience. If the experience is pleasurable, we are likely to want to revisit it, and absorb the learning. In a Feldenkrais lesson, these simple conditions support clear, concrete learning. We can then begin to get out of the way of the nervous system so it can do the job of organizing our actions in the easiest possible way. In this situation, movement has the possibility to become more integrated, fluid and effortless.

Students work with the method in two ways. An Awareness Through Movement® lesson is a sequence of gentle, guided movements on a particular theme given in a group setting. The movements are deceptively simple but can reveal how and if we do what we intend to do, and where the blocks and gaps are found. There are thousands of lessons on every conceivable human function from flexing to seeing to standing on the head. A Functional Integration® lesson addresses similar issues, but is private and individualized, with the practitioner guiding the student through a hands-on discovery process using gentle touch, movement and words.

I have found that dancers can benefit in several ways from the Feldenkrais Method. Increased awareness of habitual behaviour can lead to improvement because it provides information and choice. The ability to notice subtle differences can enable dancers to pace themselves better and avoid injury, and when injury does strike, the recovery process can be more consciously supported. Skeletal alignment tends to improve, not through intentional placing and control, but because habitual holding patterns are recognized and easier ways of organizing oneself are discovered. Breathing often becomes freer when the skeleton is better aligned and excess muscular effort is released from the diaphragm, chest and ribcage. Balance may become more available to the dancer who senses and feels how she uses her eyes, how she organizes the right and left sides of her body, and how transfer of weight involves supportive connections from the feet through the whole skeleton to the head. Range of motion can change significantly. For example, a full circling of the torso can be improved, not through traditional techniques of flexibility and strength, but by finding the ingredients that have been unavailable and integrating them into the whole circling pattern. Ultimately, the more ease and spontaneity the dancer has for movement, the more physical and psychic energy there is for artistic expression.

For me, as a former ballet dancer, and now a teacher and Feldenkrais practitioner, the most exciting possibility in this work is clarifying the dancer's self-image. Dancers need to be vulnerable and yet able to process criticism every single day. Their world is filled with information coming from outside them, and while they routinely process their artistic experience, they rarely have the opportunity to put personal growth front and centre, ahead of all other requirements. Feldenkrais practice can help to balance the artist's experience by supporting the sense of self through focussed awareness, personal exploration and discovery in a non-competitive situation. I see this as a way to improve the dancer's resilience and ability to thrive in the demanding environment of dance training and performance. With access to more resources within herself, the dancer can support the creative process more fully and at the same time maintain a clearer sense of self, remaining distinct from, yet perhaps more completely involved with, the demands of her career.

The dancer who discovers improved movement function, a clearer sense of self, and fuller access to artistic expression is more able to make perceptive choices about movement, and about other aspects of life, that will promote health and well being through a long and rewarding career.

Sources:

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